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COUNTERINSURGENCY: AN AMERICAN POLITICAL
AND MILITARY WEAKNESS

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College
in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views
and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the
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Abstract

COUNTERINSURGENCY: AN AMERICAN POLITICAL AND MILITARY WEAKNESS

Current American capability in counterinsurgency is analyzed by comparing past and present U.S. policy and military preparedness to operate within the revolutionary warfare environment. A comparison of U.S. policy and military capabilities is made concerning High Intensity Conflict (HIC), Medium Intensity Conflict (MIC), and Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) environments, and the results show a substantial weakness in the counterinsurgency arena. Although a reasonable policy has been established based on a legitimate threat analysis, American efforts to develop a strategy and organize, train, and equip U.S. military forces to operate within the counterinsurgency environment are inadequate.

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PREFACE

Approximately one half of the sources listed in the Bibliography were written by American, French, and Vietnamese authors dealing with the topic of counterinsurgency/insurgency warfare. One source discusses lessons learned by the French in both Indochina and Algeria, two concern themselves with America's involvement in Vietnam and one deals with the Hukbalhap insurrection in the Phillipines during the post WWII era. Additional sources are concerned with overall U.S. policy and strategy in the post WWII world, and two of the references deal with definitions and terms. With the exception of the latter two references mentioned, all of the sources were uncensored and each reflects the author's personal views concerning the topic of his particular subject. Although each approach and analysis is different, trends are recognizable and analysis is possible.

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Counterinsurgency: An American Political and Military Weakness

Chapter One

Introduction

The Problem: Before his death, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressed his concern that future world peace would be challenged by wars of anti-colonialism and national liberation. FDR believed that large scale world wars, such as those experienced in WWI and WWII, were far less likely to occur because of the lethality possessed in massive modern conventional armies.

Post WWII history tends to support much of what FDR asserted. The development and subsequent proliferation of nuclear weapons combined with the technological improvements of conventional military hardware has failed to produce the War of Armageddon predicted by so many. To the contrary, the world witnessed a rise of insurgencies, regional limited conflicts, and state sponsored terrorism, all of which served to reshape the world politic since 1945.

Nonetheless, American planners preoccupied with the fears and horrors such an apocalyptic war might bring, concentrated their efforts at developing forces which would provide adequate deterrence of such an occurrence. The focus has been to develop forces which would convince a possible adversary not to fight

because to do so would not be worth the risk of having to face the consequences. While reasonable, this focus of effort has created a serious void at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Because of this neglect, American efforts to develop a strategy, organize, train, and equip U.S. military forces to operate in the conterinsurgency environment are inadequate.

It can be argued that U.S. Strategies of Containment, Detente, and Flexible Response, coupled with the development of nuclear and conventional forces organized to deter war, have led to the recent collapse of the Soviet Empire and thereby provided victory for the West in the Cold War. It can also be argued that these strategies have at the same time met U.S. policy by avoiding war. At the very least, they have proven effective at preventing warfare at the level of High Intensity Conflict (that which is between conventional world war and nuclear war) and restraining warfare at the Mid Intensity Conflict level (that which is conventional war short of world war and nuclear war). At the high end of the spectrum, nuclear war and conventional world war have been avoided. At the medium or Mid Intensity Level, the Korean War, and current operations in Southwest Asia have proven to be the only major casualties of the peace, and both have been limited in scope.

Despite the apparent success of these strategies, avoiding war at the lower end of the spectrum has proven far more elusive. Since 1945 the continents of Africa, Asia, South America, and Europe (to a lesser extent), have all been engulfed in conflicts at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Examples such as

the Hukbalhap insurrection of 1946-55 and the current communist insurgency in the Phillipines, the French experience in Indochina and Algeria in the 1950's and 60's, the British problems in Northern Ireland, and the American actions in Vietnam, El Salvador, Lebanon, Grenada, and Panama, represent but a small fraction of the Low Intensity Conflicts which have occurred since WWII. In fact, since 1945, the United States has been involved in more than 200 military operations within the Low Intensity Conflict arena.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that since 1945, wars in general have not decreased but have instead increased in number. Armed with this knowledge, one might ask: Why is it that U.S. strategies, which have enjoyed so much success at avoiding conflict at the upper end of the intensity spectrum, simultaneously failed so miserably at providing the same results at the lower end? And what is it about Low Intensity Conflict that has resulted in such an explosion of activity?

The answers to these questions rest in the realization that the conduct of warfare at the High and Middle Intensity levels has proven far to risky an adventure for most nations to undertake. In the vast majority of cases, and as U.S. deterrent policy suggests, both risks and costs far outweighed the perceived benefits of armed conflict. The knowledge that conflict at the upper end could easily end in world destruction, and conflict at the mid intensity level could easily result in the destruction of one or possibly both combatant armies and/or their societies, has served to deter such conflict. As a result, the only remaining level of conflict at which warfare could be waged that would

allow for the attainment of political and military objectives at reasonable risk, was in the Low Intensity sphere. And it is precisely insurgency/counterinsurgency operations within this Low Intensity sphere, that United States policy, strategy, and military capabilities have seriously neglected.

Currently, misunderstanding and confusion exists concerning Low Intensity Conflict (LIC). Differing definitions among the armed services as well as the state department tend to muddy the water and confuse those who attempt to focus on the issue. In order to avoid such confusion, and for purposes of clarity, in this paper the definition contained in JCS Publication 1-02, DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms will be used.

Definition of LIC

Low Intensity Conflict is: "Political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above routine, peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low Intensity Conflict ranges from subversion to the use of armed force. It is waged by a combination of means employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments. Low Intensity Conflicts are often localized, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications".¹

The Army - Air Force Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) Manual and JCS Pub. 3-07, further divide LIC into four subgroups:²

1. Peacetime Contingency Operations (PCO)

2. Peacekeeping Operations (PKO)
3. Counter-Terrorism (CT)
4. Insurgency/Counterinsurgency (IN/COIN)

American LIC Threat

The 1987 National Security Strategy of the United States, identified the most significant threats to US interests in the low-intensity environment as the accumulation of unfavorable outcomes from insurgency, economic instability, or acts of terrorism. Such adverse outcomes could serve to gradually "isolate the US, its allies, and major trading partners from the Third World and from each other". The document further stated that unfavorable outcomes could lead to the interruption of Western access to vital resources; a gradual loss of US military basing and access rights; increased threats to key sea lines of communication; gradual shifting of allies and trading partners away from the US; and expanded opportunities for Soviet political and military gains.³

The 1990 National Security Strategy reinforced the premise that IN/COIN capabilities were important to U.S. security and further suggested that "it is not possible to prevent or deter conflict at the lower end of the spectrum in the same way or to the same degree as at the higher. American forces therefore must be capable of dealing effectively with the full range of threats, including insurgency and terrorism".

Conclusion

If we accept as history indicates, that LIC is the most likely scenario for future war, and if we accept the 1987 and

1990 National Security Strategies as legitimate, then it seems logical to assume that policy makers and those who implement it, understand that counterinsurgency and insurgency threats are a serious defense concern. As stated in the 1987 and reinforced in the 1990 National Defense Strategies, IN/COIN are the most serious threat to U.S. Security in the LIC environment and they require different capabilities than other forms of conflict. Yet American capability to operate world-wide in this area continues to have serious shortcomings, and it is precisely within the counterinsurgency/insurgency environment that policy makers and planners, both civilian as well as military, have the least understanding.

As proof of America's historical ignorance concerning this topic, one has but to look at American involvement in Vietnam to observe its inability to adequately appreciate the complexities of counterinsurgency/insurgency warfare. The results of the war serve notice to the fact that the U.S. could not effectively operate within the In/Coin environment. The U.S. debacle in Southeast Asia has been blamed on a myriad of political and military failures, each controversial in its own right. Most agree however, that a significant contribution to the Vietnam failure was America's lack of understanding concerning insurgencies and how to counter them. To prevent a repeat of past failures, it is important, as Sun Tzu suggested, to "know your enemy". The enemy in an insurgency operates differently than any other and to successfully defeat him, how he operates must be thoroughly understood.

Chapter Two

Insurgency/Counterinsurgency

Definition: Described as everything from wars of liberation and people's revolutions to psychological and political warfare insurgency as defined by JCS Pub 1, is:

"An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict."⁴

Webster defines it as: "a rising up against established authority."⁵

Whatever the definition, there are a number of key discriminators and characteristics which help to describe what an insurgency is in finite terms. There are five major aspects:

An insurgency:

- * Is a well organized effort;
- * Is mounted from within the country;
- * Can operate with or without outside support;
- * Has as its goal the replacement of the government;
- * Uses illegal means to accomplish its goal (coercion, terror, blackmail, etc).

Characteristics include:

- A psychological struggle is dominant over the military endeavor.
- A very strong political control and an ideological basis.
- Involvement of the entire country.

- A requirement for a fundamental condition of popular dissatisfaction.
- The legitimacy of the government is targeted by attempting to show the population that the government:
 - * cannot protect the people from attack;
 - * is not concerned or responsive to the people's needs;
 - * allows social injustice;
 - * does not provide opportunity for self-improvement;
 - * does not provide economic equality.

Such political wars of the mind as well as counterinsurgency efforts to defeat them, are basically identical with the mere exception of who is conducting the operations. The agent of the insurgency (the rebel), aims to overthrow the government, and the agent of the counterinsurgency (the government) aims to prevent such an overthrow. Three key points of interest are worth mentioning here. First, success for either depends on popular support of the indigenous people; second, such evolutions tend to be protracted in length; and third, they normally occur in underdeveloped third world countries.

Although each insurgency is different depending on a host of reasons, all seem to develop along three similar phases:

Phase 1. The Strategic Defensive/ Latent or Incipient Phase:

Insurgent objectives during phase one are to formulate a basis for popular support among the population. By focusing on internal problems, the insurgents attempt to gather support for their reforms using a variety of methods including terrorism and coercion. The goal is to convince the population that the government does

not care about them, and the insurgents do. Having accomplished this, the movement enters its next phase.

Phase 2. Strategic Balance/Active or Guerrilla Phase:

Insurgent objectives during phase two include reinforcement of indoctrination from phase one as well as the establishment of an underground shadow government. This underground government levies and collects taxes and administers justice. Simultaneously, military operations including raids and ambushes of government forces and installations are undertaken to secure limited objectives and further alienate the population from the government. At such time as the insurgency has successfully mobilized the masses against the government, it moves into its final phase.

Phase 3. Strategic Offensive/War of Movement: During this phase, insurgents conduct full scale military attacks, and if successful the people rise up to depose the government. If insurgents have judged correctly, the government will be overthrown, and in its place the insurgent shadow government will be installed.

It is important to note, that although the insurgency is divided into three phases which logically build on each preceding phase, each phase continues to operate as the insurgency progresses, and the movement is flexible enough to flow back down the scale if necessary. For example, if counterinsurgency forces successfully disrupt operations in phase three, insurgents may scale back their efforts to phase two and even phase one if necessary. Likewise, if resistance is light, the insurgency may transition quickly through each successive stage. Keeping in mind this rudimentary understanding of what an insurgency is, let us now

turn our attention to current US defense capabilities and their usefulness in this environment.

Chapter Three

American Conventional Force Limitations

General: As previously mentioned, American defense strategy and the purpose for current U.S. military force structure have not changed radically during the last 45 years. Those tasked with providing nuclear and conventional force deterrence have structured forces to deal with what was perceived as the most dangerous threats to US national security - nuclear and conventional war. As a result, US military capability is very credible at the nuclear and conventional levels. In the event of a crisis and when deterrence fails in the High Intensity Conflict (HIC) or Medium Intensity Conflict (MIC) spheres, American military capability is suited to carry out operations to obtain political goals. American conventional forces also provide a credible capability for the accomplishment of peacetime contingency, peacekeeping, and counter-terrorist operations (3/4 of LIC).

The shortcoming is that these forces do not lend themselves to use in the insurgency/counterinsurgency arena. Obviously nuclear forces are of limited or no use within this environment, and further discussion of a nuclear role is not necessary. But if and when military action is called for, we will respond with what we have available conventional forces. Past experience indicates that conventional forces have not deterred insurgencies, and the introduction of U.S. forces has proven very risky and inadequate.

American civilian and military leaders must understand that in most cases, the introduction of US conventional forces is not the answer to this type of warfare, for U.S. conventional forces are currently structured to deter and meet threats unlike those found in insurgency operations. As previously stated, it must be kept in mind that the objective of both the insurgency and counterinsurgency is to rally public support for their cause, ie ... "win the hearts and minds of the people". Because US conventional forces are not trained nor organized to conduct operations in this - the psychological arena, indiscriminate use of such forces will do far more harm than good. There are many reasons for this, and the listing below and the subsequent discussion concerns but a few.

1. Reliance on Technology
2. Training and Missions
3. Political and Cultural Differences

Reliance on Technology

American conventional military forces are the most technologically sophisticated in the world. The belief that military technology is the key to success on the battlefield, has led to an American defense strategy which is not only tied to technology but is dependent upon it. With few exceptions and only when carefully applied, this scientific approach provides little if any value in the counterinsurgency environment.

In Vietnam, a conventional force mentality caused leaders to continually seek simple scientific solutions to a complicated non-conventional, political, and psychological problem. This

reliance on technology created an additional psychological barrier between the U.S. military and those they were trying to help.

Although American military technology was very efficient at killing large numbers of people in an attrition policy, it totally neglected the real problems; and therefore; proved unsuccessful.

While some technologies may provide assistance to the counterinsurgency effort (helicopters, communications, smart bombs, etc.), reliance on technology will not solve the problems of insurgent warfare. Regardless of how stealthful the aircraft, or how much TNT can be packed into a bomb, despite the use of laser range finders or sophisticated surveillance radars, their effects in this environment are going to be minimal. The use of such capabilities does not address or solve the social, psychological, or political problems inherent in an insurgency. Such an approach is both ineffectual as well as detrimental to the objective of winning public support. If the focus of the COIN effort is allowed to rest with a reliance on machines, it will neglect the insurgents target, the people!

Training and Missions

Another problem with using U.S. conventional forces in this arena, is how they are structured, trained, and equipped to meet normal war aims. For example, the mission of the Marine Rifle Battalion (not unlike that of an army battalion), is to "locate close with and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver and repel his assault by close combat". Trained to destroy the enemy, such forces are organized and equipped as very powerful and destructive military instruments of policy, and unfortunately

collateral damage is the rule rather than the exception when force is used. One misguided or stray round can kill dozens of innocents and although unintentional, the effects remain the same. Damages and deaths caused by unfortunate incidents such as these result in further alienation of the population when grieving families lose faith in the government and turn to supporting the insurgents.

Political and Cultural Ignorance

Another problem concerning the use of US conventional force within the counterinsurgency/insurgency environment concerns political and cultural ignorance. Americans in general see the world from a very tainted and narrow perspective. As a microcosm of American society, U.S. conventional forces carry with them American prejudices and parochialisms. The myopic view that the world should be like America provides yet another impediment to attaining stated objectives. Not known for patience, Americans are results oriented, and more often than not, tend to ignore cultural and political differences when attempting to accomplish tasks. When cultural differences are wide and varied and military success is fleeting, Americans have a tendency to want to do everything themselves. A la the comment "If you want something done right, do it yourself".

As U.S. experience in Southeast Asia demonstrates, such a mentality only serves to further alienate the friendly government, its armed forces, and its population, and it eventually creates a dependency upon U.S. forces to do all the work. When this occurs, the United States is no longer supporting a friendly

government in counterinsurgency operations; it is actually
conducting a colonial war!

Chapter Four

American Special Forces

General: The previously discussed shortcomings of American conventional capability to operate within the IN/COIN environment has not gone completely unnoticed. During the 1960's, President Kennedy inspired efforts to develop units with such capabilities and subsequently tested them in the Republic of Vietnam. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) were given great emphasis initially and indeed their capability showed great promise. But as the war dragged through two subsequent American administrations, and as it became a conventional forces dual, Special Forces units began to lose their impact and increasingly became misused and subsequently relegated to an insignificant role.

Nonetheless, hindsight seems to indicate that the effort to develop such forces held tremendous promise then, as well as now. It was of such significance that US Special Forces are still in existence today. What then has happened to Special Forces in the twenty years that have passed since America withdrew from Vietnam? Have the past twenty plus years allowed the lessons learned from Vietnam to be incorporated within U.S. SF capabilities?

S.F. Missions

To answer these questions, let's look first at what it is that U.S. Army Special Forces are tasked with accomplishing within American Defense strategy. The five missions of Special Operations Forces are:⁶

- * Terrorism counteraction - SOf Delta Mission
- * Unconventional warfare (Insurgency) - SF Mission
- * Foreign internal defense (Counterinsurgency) - SF Mission
- * Special reconnaissance operations - SF Mission
- * Direct action operations - SOf Ranger Mission

As observed in the second and third missions shown above, Army Special Forces have been specifically assigned the IN/COIN missions for the United States. It is worth noting that it is extremely difficult to properly train forces to adequately address the three missions assigned. One might argue that each of these missions requires so much training that any concentrated effort in one area would compete against each of the others and create training deficiencies as well as readiness problems. However, another might rebut this argument by pointing out that all the missions, while undoubtedly complicated, could nonetheless be accomplished through comprehensive training because SF forces recruit only the best and brightest - as Barry Sadler put it "100 men will test today but only 3 win the Green Beret".⁷

Accepting this, let's turn our attention to current SF organization and its ability to conduct such training.

S.F. Organization/Locations

As presently organized, there are nine groups all of which are organized along the same general framework. Five are in the Active Component (1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 10th), two are in the U.S. Army Reserve (the 11th and 12th), and two are in the ARNG (the 19th and 20th). In essence, five groups are in the Active Component and four are in the Reserves, and each is

regionally oriented:⁸

- one to CENTCOM
- three to EUCOM
- 2/3 of a group to Africa (remaining 1/3 to LANTCOM)
- three to PACOM
- one to SOUTHCOM

When basing in CONUS is addressed, Reserve Component detachments, which make up almost half of the SF capability, are scattered over 29 states nationwide. Such an organization does not seem conducive to the training and purpose of effort required of forces tasked with such difficult jobs. In a 1990 Naval War College article, Army Special Forces reserve officer, Lt.Col.TC Ayers, describes the current situation as follows: "Within the RC forces this stationary scheme is at best chaotic".⁹

S.F. MOSQ rates

If on the other hand one looks at the Army's index for evaluating capabilities (Military Occupational Skills Qualifications MOSQ), the evidence is even more alarming. With an overall army goal of 85%, the Active Component Special Forces Groups MOSQ rate is 90%, but the Reserve Component figure is only 55% as of December 1988.¹⁰

In fact, if we take refuge in the words of Army experts on the subject, perhaps Colonel John P. Gritz conclusions, contained in his U.S. Army War College thesis "Reserve Special Forces: Challenge for the 21st Century", is the best indicator of the Reserve Component SF capability. He writes:

"The status quo acceptance of RC SF in their current state

of training and readiness is unacceptable. Units are not individually or collectively trained or qualified as Special Forces, do not possess enhanced skills beyond conventional airborne units, have little language capability, are neither physically conditioned nor psychologically prepared for employment as early fighters, and have little cultural awareness of the regions they must defend or countries they must attack. Wearing a green beret does not make a man Special Forces. Most RC SF are not Special Forces as currently organized and trained."¹¹

The current status of training within the R/C SF forces suggests that the forces specifically dedicated to the IN/COIN mission are not capable of carrying out its assigned mission. One might argue the SOF forces such as Delta or the Rangers might take up the slack. Because they are specifically tasked with Terrorism Counteraction and Direct Action Operations, they are capable of operating and providing some capability within the IN/COIN environment. However, such capability will be restricted to their use in phase III and small portions of phase II, and they will only be effective in the military sphere. While there is a role for such forces it is limited to the seizure of military objectives only and therefore neglects the reason for establishing SF forces in the first place.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

In general there are two conclusions to be drawn from the previous discussion; one concerns the character of insurgency conflict and the other concerns U.S. military capability to successfully operate within that environment.

Insurgency Conclusion.

The IN/COIN environment is different than that of any other warfare environment, and it requires a different approach if we are to be successful in defeating our adversaries there. It is a level of conflict where psychological objectives are of greater import than military successes. To successfully operate within the IN/COIN arena will require new and concentrated efforts within the political, economic, and military arena. The simple introduction of conventional force will not by itself prove successful in meeting the challenges offered by this form of conflict. Dynamic and informed leadership is required from both the civilian and military leaders of this country if we expect to prevent a future debacle such as Vietnam.

To come to grips with the difficulties of operating within the IN/COIN environment, several distinct characteristics beg consideration.

1. Each insurgency is different and each requires solutions in and of its own.
2. Insurgencies are not wars in which the destruction of the enemy military arm alone is going to win the peace.

3. To win will require efforts across a broad spectrum of political, social, and psychological issues.

4. Because of their psychological nature, popular support is required to win.

5. Military forces must be specially organized, trained, and equipped to meet the political objectives characteristic of this environment.

U.S. Military Capability Conclusion

U.S. forces are not currently capable of successfully operating within this environment. Conventional forces are not organized, nor trained to meet the complex requirements of insurgency warfare and Army Special Forces (at least 4/9) do not meet Army individual MOS qualification standards.

Recommendations

Accepting the two previous conclusions and the accompanying IN/COIN characteristics, what then should future American strategy be concerning the insurgency and counterinsurgency environment, and how should it be implemented?

First, American strategy should refocus on the LIC environment with added emphasis on both the counterinsurgency and insurgency area of operations. Resource allocation as well as congressional oversight should immediately be instituted to organize, equip, and train American military forces in counterinsurgency/insurgency operations. The US Army Special Operations Command already exists and possesses a good bit of expertise from which to build upon.

Second, US attempts to support friendly governments in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations must be tempered by the

realization that it is in America's interest that the Host nation conduct the operations, not US forces.

Third, to be successful will require capital investment in the area of economic support and nation building so that dissatisfaction of the population is not available for insurgent exploitation.

Fourth, US policy makers must be aware that US public support is also necessary to win. Therefore, the American people must be educated to the threats as they exist, and they must be honestly informed of our goals and efforts.

Fifth, clear political goals must be developed and understood by all involved.

Sixth, once a national strategy has been matched with military forces which have been structured, equipped, and trained to effectively operate within the IN/COIN arena, U.S. leaders should be willing to use them as early as possible. It is important to understand that success within this arena becomes progressively more difficult for counterinsurgency forces as time passes. As the insurgency gains momentum, the more desperate becomes the dilemma for COIN operations. If allowed to progress to Phase III before acting, insurgent forces will have already secured the high ground (popular support), and efforts to turn the conflict around will be almost impossible. The more desperate the situation becomes, the louder will be the call to introduce conventional forces to gain control of the existing environment. To do so with the forces presently available to American policy makers will in all likelihood result in another Vietnam.

If America is to meet the challenges within the IN/COIN environment of the 21st Century, adjustments must be made within the current political and military infrastructure. Although reasons exist for those shortcomings mentioned, it is imperative that U.S. political and military leaders make efforts to resolve the situation. If they do not, America will enter the next century with an inadequate ability to influence National Security concerns within the IN/COIN environment.



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